

Dredging in protest: Miners find 'pay streak' on the South Fork Clearwater; defy EPA

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An American Mining Rights Association-affiliated suction dredge operator pauses while clearing an obstruction from the sluice on Shannon Poe's dredge. As of last Sunday, July 20, three AMRA setups continued to work the South Fork Clearwater River in opposition to federal permit requirements. The pictured dredge is a six-incher Poe refers to as "Big Blue"; details are available on AMRA's Facebook page, facebook.com/americanminingrights. Photo by [Andrew Ottoson](#).

By **Andrew Ottoson**

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ELK CITY — East of old Golden, the South Fork Clearwater River bent around the feet of mountains. Where the river slowed, it deposited gold which over time settled to the very bottom, to bedrock. Here, near Mile Marker 39, two workers decked out in diving gear operated Shannon Poe's dredge — a six-incher — while the Free Press interviewed Poe last Saturday, July 19.

"We're getting some stuff out of here that's a quarter-inch, maybe a third of an inch — it's some nice stuff," Poe said, pulling out a half-inch hunk he keeps as a necklace. "But you don't get big gold out of this river."

"Not like that," Elk City resident and longtime South Fork dredger Gay Richardson chimed in. "The biggest I ever actually weighed was three-quarters of an ounce."

Poe gestured toward the dredge, saying: "In a hole like that, if you hit a pay streak that is a real collection spot for a concentration of it, you could pull a hundred grand out of there in a day."

The chance to strike it rich — combined with enough actual strikes — once sustained thousands of people in Elk City. The gold rush ended about a hundred years ago.

A few ounces might not be enough to fuel a new heyday, but thousands of dollars came to town last week as miners — some local, some from as far away as Florida and Arizona — put their setups to work in defiance of a federal regulation that threatens to close local rivers to suction dredging.

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Shannon Poe founded the American Mining Rights Association (AMRA) in 2013 as an educational non-profit, he said, to help miners keep access to their claims. AMRA miners have been working the river since July 15 to protest a permit requirement that would end all dredging in the Clearwater and Salmon drainages.

He said they chose July 15 because, under state rules, that’s the day the South Fork Clearwater River opened.

The Idaho Department of Water Resources “letter permit” is required of dredgers and other miners who use mechanical equipment; the “letter permit” caps dredging motors at 15 horsepower and caps the intake diameter at five inches.

The miners are ignoring a federal permit the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) mandated in 2013, which shuts dredgers out of both of the area’s major salmon-bearing rivers, their tributaries and all their associated streams.

The miners – and their political supporters – describe this act of defiance as a protest.

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Sometimes swimming, sometimes standing in the shallows, Poe’s workers direct a hose connected to a small gasoline-powered engine on a platform supported by two pontoons; behind the engine is a sluice. Eventually, Poe said, they’ll reach a large boulder which juts several feet above the surface. Yards downstream from the boulder, they found a gold deposit. When they reach the boulder, they’ll angle toward the inside edge of the river’s curve, and follow the pay streak into the shallows.

At the surface, the workers take time to set aside larger rocks and refuel the rig.

Mostly, they work below the surface in a hole that includes one major safety feature. Rather than undercutting large rocks by removing underlying gravels, they use the dredge to create a set of stair-steps from bedrock to the surface. Poe said the hole is about eight feet deep.

Topside, the color of the sandy material sloughed from the sluice betrays its geological secrets. Poe describes one layer as “coffee creamer” – a reasonable description for a milky brown wash. Deep layers show the reddish tint of iron. These gravels settle out within a few hundred feet of the dredge; it’s visible from a couple hundred yards downstream, near where AMRA posted its sign earlier in the week.

There is no “coffee creamer” – nor any other trace of the work – visible at Mile Marker 38.

The EPA permit is founded on the idea that these sediments pollute the beds where salmon spawn; Idaho’s permit advises “suction dredges and other recreational mining equipment, when improperly used, can cause severe damage to fish populations.”

Gay Richardson suggested the stretch Poe is dredging would be too rocky for spawning if not for the gravels settling off of the sluice. To support his argument – that suction dredging does not pollute – Richardson cites two dozen documents, primarily testimony and research by Joseph C. Greene, a retired EPA research biologist. Among them are the essentials of the argument dredgers and their supporters pressed in a hearing by the Idaho legislature earlier this year.

Several local elected officials have long supported the miners: Sen. Sheryl Nuxoll visited Poe’s dredge earlier in the week; Rep. Paul Shepherd sponsored legislation to nullify the EPA last year; Idaho County Sheriff Doug Giddings and Idaho County Commissioner Jim Chmelik both testified on the miners’ behalf at the legislature’s hearing; Chmelik has directly compared the miners’ disobedience to that of Rosa Parks, whose disobedience on a bus sparked boycotts that fueled the civil rights movement.

Poe turned to the words of Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor to sum up the dredgers’ view: The river system is like a pot of soup, and dredging (like stirring the pot) adds nothing – so dredging does not pollute. Poe and Richardson also said it will take just one seasonal runoff surge for the signs the place was ever dredged to disappear.

Later, when the workers approach the boulder, Poe explained, there’s a chance the sluice could retain an ounce of gold in an hour of operation. For Poe, it would be a return on a sizable investment – about \$100,000 just in dredges.

“There’s nothing recreational about this,” he said.

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